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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to understand human aggressive behavior, psychologists have explored and emphasized variables related to the aggressor, the victim, and the situation, e.g., intentions of the aggressor and the consequences for the victim. Observer-related variables, such as level of moral reasoning have not been studied. To examine the relationship between judgments of aggression and moral reasoning it was hypothesized that judgments of aggression by those at lower levels of moral reasoning would be more influenced by consequences, while judgments of those at higher levels of moral reasoning would be more influenced by intentions. College and high school students (N=342) read six vignettes involving aggressive acts including all combinations of consequences (good and bad) and intentions (altruistic, instrumental, and hostile), and rated the degree of appropriateness of the acts on five point scales. Results indicated a significant relationship between level of moral reasoning and judgments of aggression. Those with higher levels of moral reasoning judged acts to be more aggressive and were more influenced by intentions than those at lower levels of reasoning. The findings suggest that the integration of the moral reasoning and judgment of aggression literature would be beneficial to both areas. (PAS)

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THE RELATION OF MORAL REASONING, TYPE OF AGGRESSION, AGGRESSOR INTENTIONS, AND VICTIM CONSEQUENCES TO JUDGMENTS OF AGGRESSION

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Minneapolis, MN, May 6-8, 1982.

The relation of moral reasoning, type of aggression, aggressor intentions, and victim consequences to judgments of aggression

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In an attempt to understand human aggressive behavior, psychologists have explored the influence of a number of variables, such as learning (Bandura, 1973), innate factors (Freud, 1925), anger (Zillman, 1978), and cognitive factors (Rule & Ferguson, in press; Ferguson & Rule in press). Rule and Ferguson have recently focused on factors affecting cognitive processes involved in judgments of aggression. Rule and Nesdale in 1976 referred to these judgments as moral judgments of aggression because they dealt with the "rightness" and "wrongness" of aggressive behavior. As can be seen by Rule and Nesdale's and Rule and Ferguson's review of the literature, the emphasis has been on variables related to the aggressor, the victim, and the situation, such as the intentions of the aggressor and the consequences for the victim. The only observer variable which has generally been taken into account is that of age.

The purpose of the present study was to explore the effect of an observer related variable - level of moral reasoning - on judgments of aggression, in an attempt to integrate two previously unrelated areas of social development, that of moral reasoning and judgments of aggression. While the aggression judgment literature focuses, in part, on how blameworthy aggressive acts are, the moral reasoning literature focuses on how moral judgments such as these are arrived at and justified. Kohlberg describes six stages of moral reasoning which are partially defined by a shift from reliance on consequences to a reliance on intentions. This developmental progression has also been noted in the literature on judgment of aggression. Based on similar developmental

patterns and related cognitive processes, this study hypothesized that judgments of aggression would vary as a function of moral reasoning, with those at lower levels of moral reasoning being influenced by consequences to a greater extent than those at higher stages,and those at higher stages being influenced to a greater degree by intentions.

The subjects were 177 introductory psychology students at a large private Midwestern university and 165 high school students from a small city in the same state. Subjects read six vignettes involving aggressive acts and were asked to rate the degree of aggressiveness and the degree of appropriateness of the acts on five point scales. All subjects were randomly assigned to one of three types of aggression: physical, verbal, and withholding of resources. Within each type of aggression, each subject was presented with six different vignettes. The six vignettes included all combinations of two consequences (good and bad) and three intentions (altruistic, instrumental, and hostile). The following is an example of the vignettes which illustrates verbal aggression with a good consequence and a hostile intent:

> In a public campaign debate for class president, Angela and Mary were discussing the most important issues for the coming year. When Angela cited vandalism and disrespect for school property, Mary, who has always hated Angela and has wanted to hurt her, began to yell at Angela. In a very personal attack Mary questioned Angela's character and accused her and her friends of engaging in vandalism. Angela replied so passionately and effectively that she won the debate and eventually the campaign.

Each subject also completed Gibbs' Sociomoral Reflection Measure which is a written form of Kohlberg's Moral Judgment Interview. In this measure subjects are presented with two moral dilemmas and asked questions to elicit their opinions andtheir reasons for their opinions. These responses were then scored by trained raters using the criteria set forth by Kohlberg in his Standard Form Scoring Manual (1979) to determine the subject's level of moral reasoning.

Subjects' moral reasoning scores fell into three stages: two, three, and four. Stage 2 moral reasoning is typified by judgments based on instrumental self-interest. Judgments tend to be influenced by physical or hedonistic consequences. Stage 3 moral reasoning focuses on conformity and interpersonal mutuality. Factors such as relationships, feelings, and intentions become important at this stage. Stage 4 reasoning involves viewing issues from a systemic perspective, focusing on what is good for the system or society as a whole.

Two 3X3X3X2 ANOVAs, one on degree of aggressiveness and one on degree of appropriateness, were calculated for level of moral reasoning, type of aggression, intentions, and consequences. All four main effects for both aggressiveness and appropriateness were significant. As has been found in other studies (Rule & Ferguson, in press; Rule & Nesdale, 1976), acts with harmful intentions were judged to be most aggressive and most inappropriate and acts with altruistic motives were judged to be least aggressive and inappropriate. A factor which has not been taken into account in many studies (Bath, 1980), type of aggression, was found to have a significant effect. Physical aggression was rated the most aggressive and inappropriate and withholding of resources was rated the least aggressive and inappropriate.

Acts with bad consequences were rated significantly more aggressive and inappropriate than those with good consequences. This result was somewhat surprising, not only because it goes against what would be expected by Piagetian theory - older subjects should not be affected by consequences - but also because a previous study by Nesdale, Rule, and McAra (1975) had found undergraduates not to be affected by consequences. It is possible that the inclusion of high school students in this experiment affected this result, or it may be that in some circumstances consequences are a factor in the judgments of older individuals.

Subjects whose moral reasoning was at stages 3 or 4 rated acts as more aggressive and less appropriate than those at stage 2. This result would seem to qualify the conclusion of earlier studies (Ferguson & Rule, 1980; Bath, 1980; Suls & Kalle, 1978) which have found older individuals to be more lenient in their judgments of aggression than younger individuals. It should be noted, though, that all of these studies used used subjects younger than high school age. It could be that judgments of aggression follow a curvilinear development, with younger children and adults rating acts as more aggressive than those at the ages inbetween.

A significant interaction effect was found for type of aggression and intention for both degree of aggressiveness and degree of appropriateness. Judgments of physical and verbal aggression were not affected by intentions, but withholding of resources was rated more aggressive and inappropriate when the intent was to harm. The interaction between moral reasoning and intention was significant for degree of aggressiveness. The judgments of aggression made by stage 2 moral reasoners were not affected by intentions, yet those of stages 3 and 4 reasoners were. A three-way interaction among moral reasoning, intentions, and type of aggression was also found to be significant for aggression. While judgments of physical and verbal aggression varied

little, those with higher levels of moral reasoning were affected by intentions in their judgments of the withholding of resources.

These results indicate that a relationship does exist between level of moral reasoning and judgments of aggression. The relationship that was demonstrated is in agreement with what would be expected from Kohlberg's theory of moral development. The higher the level of moral reasoning, the more aggressive acts were judged to be. Concerns with the feelings and rights of others and for society as a whole enter into stage 3 and 4 reasoning, and these values would seem to be more incompatible with aggression than the instrumental self-interest found at stage 2. Also, as was hypothesized, subjects whose moral reasoning was at stages 3 or 4 were influenced by intentions to a greater extent than those at stage 2.

Studies so far have generally focused on only one observer variable, that of age. The results of the present study seem to indicate that another observer variable, social cognitive abilities such as moral reasoning, should also be taken into account. The integration of the moral reasoning literature with the judgment of aggression literature may be of benefit to both areas, with moral reasoning providing the study of judgment of aggression with a useful conceptual framework and moral reasoning gaining another area in which to explore its validity, applicability, and utility.

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